

Advancing a Human Centred Approach to Development: Integrating Culture into the Global Development Agenda

UNESCO Think Piece

13 March 2012

Introduction

While the MDGs have generated an unprecedented universal drive to mobilize the international community around clear and shared priorities and objectives, achievement gaps have systematically been linked to implementation at the local level.

The “one size does not fit all” motto implies that development be place-based.

The process of operationalizing concepts of sustainable development in the last couple of decades has brought into focus local specificities, cultural identities, and values. Further, the failure of well-intentioned development programmes, and the gaps in achieving the MDGs, revealed the inadequacy of universal policies and approaches to development regardless of cultural context.

This Think Piece explains how integrating culture into the three pillars of development, and embedding policies with key messages about cultural diversity can contribute to an effective development agenda. It also highlights how culture, including heritage and creative industries, contributes to socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

The importance of integrating culture in the global development agenda

Since the early 1990s, Amartya Sen and Mahbub al Haq advocated for a model of development that would enable individuals and communities to “lead the kind of life they choose”. This view of development, predicated on investing in human capabilities and opportunities, has resulted in widespread improvements in non-economic areas of development, notably in education and health. Measuring the success of development interventions beyond the criterion of contributing to gross domestic product (GDP) has centred focus onto the community and the individual.

The Millennium Development Goals advocate for a human development that emphasizes individual well-being, including improving education and health. They argue for redefining development goals in humanistic rather than in purely economic terms.

In operationalizing the idea of sustainable development, as well as in pursuing progress on the development goals, practitioners and scholars alike have advocated for the importance of accepting diversities and multiple systems. Rather than singular solutions, they espouse a plurality of strategies, institutional organizations, modes, and scales that are responsive to their respective local cultures, communities and contexts.

Culture is inherent to development because it constantly evolves and reflects its history, mores, institutions and attitudes, its social movements, conflicts and struggles, and the configurations of political power, internally and in the world at large. In addition to representing a source of identity, innovation and creativity for individuals and communities, culture reflects people's adaptation to the environment over long periods of time, and often embodies patterns of production and consumption that are more sustainable by design.

In the lead-up to the elaboration of the MDGs, growing recognition of culture's role in development processes led to important initiatives and research that aimed to capture and measure the links and relationships between culture and development. Similar to the World Commission on the Environment and Development's environmental achievements, the World Commission on Culture and Development, led by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, aimed to firmly position culture in the development arena during the mid-1990s.¹ While many of its recommendations were pursued, including the vision for a development model that fully integrated the potential of culture, the recommendations did not entirely materialize, largely due to difficulties in concretely measuring and demonstrating culture's impact on development.

Great progress on that front has been achieved since the World Commission on Culture (1996) and the Stockholm Plan of Action (1998). Research initiatives have focused on elaborating statistics and indicators that can measure and quantify culture's role in development. This movement has been particularly prominent in developed countries with strong statistical systems. EUROSTATS, for example, conduct regular surveys with a cultural theme that provide in-depth snapshots on how culture affects both local and national identities and well-being. Hong Kong released its famous Creativity Index to capture cultural economic and social dynamism. Even in developing or emerging countries, interest in cultural statistics is growing. In Latin America, investments in enhanced statistical systems over the past two decades have resulted in policymaking that is informed by new data about the economic weight of culture. This data points to great – and often largely untapped – potential. In Brazil, for example, culture employs close to 5% of the population. In other words, measurements of culture's qualitative and quantitative impact are beginning to change the way culture is viewed by policymakers at the national level.

Recent developments at the level of the United Nations

Although left out of the Millennium Declaration and subsequently of the MDGs, culture has resurged as a priority over the past decade as a result of the realization among development actors that development initiatives and approaches that take into account cultural contexts are more likely to result in inclusive, equitable and human-rights based progress. Indeed, such an approach to development reinforces the argument of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness which advocated for interventions to be community-led and community-focused in order to achieve maximum effectiveness.

¹ J. Perez de Cuellar, *Our Creative Diversity*, Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, (UNESCO : 1996).

In this regard, the experience of the Culture and Development window of the MDG-F programme, the first large scale inter-agency programme dedicated to the role of culture in development, demonstrates how integrating culture adds value to development interventions and increases their impact. It also underscores that culture can be a powerful driver for development, with community-wide impacts across the social, economic and environmental pillars of development.

Integrating the cultural dimension into development is an approach used by the United Nations in recent years. The Outcome document of the 2010 MDG Summit, entitled, “Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals”, “acknowledged the diversity of the world and recognized that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind”. It further emphasized the importance of culture for development and its contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The same concept was reiterated by two consecutive UNGA Resolutions on Culture and Development in 2010 and 2011 that called for “the mainstreaming of culture into development policies and strategies”.

Pursuant to the 2010 Resolution on Culture and Development, the July 2011 UNSG Report presented the first opportunity to take stock of actions by the United Nations entities that integrate culture into policies and operations, showcasing the culturally-sensitive approaches to development across the United Nations system and demonstrating the impact of the cultural sector on development at large, and in particular, on the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

The contributions of 18 United Nations entities summarized in this UNSG Report demonstrate that culturally-sensitive approaches are already applied through mandates in areas as diverse as agriculture, food security, poverty alleviation, health, environmental sustainability, urbanization, refugee protection, migration, social cohesion, human rights, and gender equality. However, the Report also showed that such approaches and practices are neither consolidated nor fully assessed within the United Nations’ shared policies, practices, or long-term vision. The current global efforts that address gaps in achieving the MDGs and map the way forward for future development goals and approaches thus remain insufficiently informed of culture’s impact on and contribution to development.

The trend toward integrating culture into UN development policies is particularly visible at the level of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). Indeed, by January 2012, culture was included in 70% of UNDAF work plans worldwide. These figures are the result of an increasingly positive trend since the late 1990s, when only about 30% of UNDAFs included cultural entries with almost a doubling of the number of entries between 2006 and 2008.

Cultural entries in UNDAF are mainly related to social and economic development, with 30% falling within the Social Pillar, 25% related to the Economic Pillar, 18% to each of the Sustainable Development and Governance Pillars, and 10% to Human Rights.

Poverty, inequalities and the cultural dimension

The Millennium Development Goals helped to refocus international attention on poverty alleviation as a key goal of development. Despite grand modernization projects, vast areas of poverty persist. An understanding of underdevelopment and poverty is essential in order to design effective interventions. Rather than viewing poverty simply as a lack of economic capital, recent scholarship has emphasized the significance of identifying local causes and patterns of persistent inequalities. Some scholars, following the line of Amartya Sen, call for skill-building and training among poorer communities. Arjun Appadurai asserts the importance of expanding opportunities for the poor in order to allow them to exercise their choices and work towards their aspirations. The UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development (1996) noted that people turn to culture as a means of self-definition and mobilization and to assert their local cultural values. Among the poorest communities, however, often their own values are the only thing that they can assert. The Commission further noted some studies' findings that traditional values can bring identity, continuity and meaning to a community.

The Contribution of the Culture Sector to the Economy

Culture-led community development aims at converting the cultural wealth of a community or region into economic wealth by promoting its unique identity, traditions, and cultural products and by generating jobs and revenue. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage, cultural tourism, cultural and creative industries including broadcasting, film, publishing, and music, and cultural products such as hand-woven textiles, and traditional handmade objects, have all been significant in this regard. A major challenge has been to balance economic returns without commodifying culture, while also safeguarding the knowledge and practices that have made the cultural and creative elements meaningful to their caretakers. Furthermore, institutions, policies, legal frameworks, and market access have been essential for economic returns above and beyond goods and services.

The economic prospects of the culture sector are particularly relevant for developing countries given their rich cultural heritage and substantial labour force. Sustainable tourism, as well as the culture and creative industries, can be strategic tools for income generation and poverty reduction. Cultural industries require limited capital investment and have low entry barriers. Culture-related economic opportunities are not easily outsourced, making them attractive to investors. Further, the poor and marginalized often work in cultural industries, promoting this sector will likely have a direct impact on vulnerable populations, including women, and may stimulate social inclusion while maximizing jobs and other economic opportunities.

Cultural industries account for more than 3.4 percent of the global GDP with a global market share of approximately 1.6 trillion USD in 2007, almost double the international tourism receipts for the same year.² Cultural and creative industries represent one of the most rapidly expanding sectors in the global economy with a growth rate of 17.6 % in the Middle East, 13.9 % in Africa, 11.9 % in South America, 9.7 % in Asia, 6.9 % in Oceania, and 4.3 % in

² PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), 2008.

North and Central America.³ The sector grew steadily in the 1980s and exponentially in the 1990s, when creative economies in the member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) grew at an annual rate twice that of service industries and four times that of manufacturing.⁴

National economies significantly benefit from the cultural sector. Recent UNESCO Statistics (March 2012) show that in Ecuador, the formal and private cultural activities contributed 4.76% to the 2010 GDP and in the same year, 2.64% of the total employed population worked in cultural occupations. Almost 60% of the latter were women.⁵ Mali's culture sector accounted for 5.8 % of employment in 2004 and 2.38 % of GDP in 2006,⁶ and Thailand employs an estimated two million employees in the craft industry.⁷ The creative sector in Brazil contributed 6.7 % to GDP in 1998.⁸ Promoting and further developing the culture sector as a powerful economic generator can provide important outlets for innovation.

Similarly, the tourism sector has diversified to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors, especially in developing countries. Gross worldwide tourism receipts grew at an average rate of 7 % from 1998 to 2008. This figure was 12 % for the Least Developed Countries for the same period.⁹ In 2009, international tourism generated 919 billion USD in export earnings.¹⁰ Emerging and developing countries accounted for 47 % of world international tourism arrivals and 36.9 % of world international tourism receipts in 2010.¹¹ Cultural tourism, more specifically, accounts for 40 % of world tourism revenues. Cultural heritage sites in general and UNESCO-inscribed World Heritage sites in particular, generate substantial revenues and employment from tourism. The same applies to intangible cultural heritage which safeguards living cultural expressions and traditional expertise. Museums and other cultural institutions also significantly contribute to economic investments and benefits.

The contribution of culture to social cohesion

Respecting and supporting cultural expressions contribute to strengthening the social capital of a community and creates a sense of stewardship and trust in public institutions. Though inherently complex and difficult to quantify, investing in intercultural dialogue can help prevent conflicts, build peace, and protect the rights of marginalized groups, within and between nations, thus creating conditions for achieving development goals. By promoting understanding and reconciliation, intercultural dialogue transcends barriers, serving as a valuable lever countering ignorance, prejudice, and exclusion. In addition to fostering social

³ Idem

⁴ Idem

⁵ Culture for Development Indicators Suite (CDIS), a UNESCO methodology to measure the contribution of culture to national development processes. Figures are preliminary.

Based on the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics, the methodology of the CIDS economic indicator on GDP distinguishes between central cultural activities which represented 2.74%, and equipment and support cultural activities which reached 2,02% in Ecuador for 2010.

⁶ IBF International Consulting for the EC, 2007.

⁷ Idem

⁸ UNESCO World Report, Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue, 2009.

⁹ UNWTO, June 2011.

¹⁰ Idem

¹¹ Idem

cohesion, culture is an essential component of human development as it provides a sense of identity and is a source of creativity on both the individual and societal levels.

While globalization promotes the integration of cultures, it also leads to a loss of 'uniqueness' among local culture. Modernization can lead to alienation, exclusion, and a diminishing sense of identity and community. Balancing the benefits of integration in a globalized world with the downside of a weakened local culture requires concerted action. Culturally-sensitive approaches help protect vulnerable communities from the pressure of homogenization.

The contribution of culture to environmental sustainability

Local and indigenous knowledge systems and environmental management practices provide valuable insight and tools for tackling ecological challenges, preventing biodiversity loss, reducing land degradation, and mitigating the effects of climate change. With the profound development implications of climate change, it becomes more important to harness the positive practices embedded in traditional cultures that value the balance between the natural and human worlds. Seeking synergies between traditional environmental practices and high technologies, as well as strengthening community participation in conservation initiatives are central aspects of environmental sustainability.

Culture has an important – yet often underestimated – role to play in tackling current ecological challenges, coping with climate change, preventing biodiversity loss and ensuring environmental sustainability. Sustainability cannot be conceptualized as a natural world isolated from the societies that extract from and impact it. The values and beliefs that shape the relationship of a people to their natural environment are a central component of sustainable development.

Cultural factors influence lifestyles, individual behaviour, consumption patterns, values related to environmental stewardship, and the ways in which we interact with our natural environment. There is much to learn from the environmental management skills found among local, rural or indigenous peoples, including multi-faceted strategies of appropriation, small-scale production with little surplus and low-energy needs, and a custodial approach to land and natural resources that avoids waste and resource depletion. Not only are biological and cultural diversity linked to a wide range of human-nature interactions, but they co-evolve, are interdependent, and mutually reinforcing.

Empowering communities to be agents of their development

In contrast to previous efforts at top-down development programmes and policies that international agencies and national governments devised and implemented, in recent years scholars like John Friedmann and Marshall Sahlins proposed alternative approaches to development that empower the impacted community to be the motor for change. Communities should have stewardship in directing their own destinies to achieve sustainable and long-term progress. Moreover, loss of indigenous and local culture also leads to a loss of agency where modernization and development become external forces driving change from

the outside. It's important to remember that societies labelled 'underdeveloped' by economic development measures may have been living sustainably within their environments for generations.

Conflicts, Disasters and Risk preparedness

As natural disasters and wars rip apart societies, and as large-scale modernization projects, urbanization, and transnational migration bring about sudden relocations, the endurance of cultural beliefs, values, practices, and knowledge, as well as their transmission across generations, have become significant concerns. Traditional knowledge handed down from generation to generation helps to save lives in the face of natural disasters, as recent stories have reported in the last decade.

In addition, a well-conserved natural and historic environment, supported by traditional knowledge and skills, considerably reduces potential risk factors, and strengthens the resilience of communities. When integrated into modern environmental management schemes, traditional management techniques have proven to be efficient and cost-effective tools to mitigate environmental risks and exposure to natural disasters.

Culture in all its tangible and intangible dimensions constitutes a major resource for resilience in the face of disaster, owing to its strong symbolic value and because it incorporates traditional knowledge accumulated over centuries of adaptation to environmental conditions. Experience has shown that the degradation of natural resources, neglected rural areas, urban sprawl, and poorly engineered new constructions increase the vulnerability of communities to disaster risks, especially in poorer countries.

Integrating culture in the development agenda: the normative framework

To integrate culture in the development agenda, clear objectives, definitions, mechanisms, tools, monitoring and evaluation systems are needed.

Through seven Cultural Conventions dealing with tangible and intangible heritage, the diversity of cultural expressions and creative industries, and illicit trafficking of cultural goods — among which the World Heritage Convention, the Intangible Heritage Convention and the Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions—the United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organisation has devised policies, operational guidelines, monitoring and evaluation tools, capacity-building programmes, international funds, as well as concrete operational actions that safeguard and promote culture. Firmly grounded in a human-rights based approach, these Conventions establish a range of governmental and international obligations and cooperation mechanisms that facilitate concrete policy options.

Beyond contributing to a larger and comprehensive normative system on culture for development, these highly ratified conventions establish a strong conceptual and normative framework negotiated and agreed upon by the 195 UNESCO Member States for integrating culture into the global development agenda.

Conclusion

The integration of the cultural dimension into the sustainable development agenda advances a human-centred approach to development that takes into account cultural diversity and the complexities of societies and local contexts. It facilitates sustainable development and promotes the plurality of knowledge systems, in addition to serving as a powerful socio-economic resource.

A better articulation of a shared agenda, and guidelines towards mainstreaming culture into the distinctive mandates of United Nations entities, particularly the post-2015 road map, could ensure a more effective response to development needs, namely through the following lines of actions:

- A systematic integration of the cultural dimension in the conception, measurement, and implementation of the development agenda to ensure an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development.
- The promotion of intercultural dialogue to harness social cohesion, thereby creating an environment conducive to development.
- Harnessing the multifaceted benefits of cultural diversity as an asset for a human rights-based approach to governance, while countering the adverse effects of harmful traditional practices through effective awareness-raising tools.
- Capitalizing on cultural values and the plurality of knowledge systems to mobilize community participation in environmental initiatives. More specifically, integrating traditional knowledge as well as practices into sustainable environment strategies and seeking synergies between traditional environmental practices and high technology.
- Strengthening the implementation of the normative framework in the field of culture to achieve the global development agenda.
- Supporting sustainable tourism, cultural and creative industries, and heritage-based urban revitalization as powerful economic sub-sectors that generate green employment, stimulate local development, and foster creativity.
- With respect to the format and scope of the post-2015 agenda, consideration for the cultural dimension requires that due attention be paid to processes as well as outcomes.
- The cultural dimension is indeed a transversal, cross-cutting concern that affects all the dimensions of development. This however, should not only be reflected in a separate “guiding principle”, disconnected from the development goals’ operational targets and indicators. On the contrary, it is crucial that all development goals incorporate the cultural dimension within their proposed strategies, with a specific reference to concrete culture-related targets and their respective indicators.

- In parallel, the post-2015 development agenda should recognize the specific contribution that culture as a sector, including tangible and intangible heritage, cultural and creative industries and cultural infrastructures, have made towards achieving a sustainable development, including for poverty alleviation, social inclusion and environmental sustainability.